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560

How to Lie Successfully to the Lie Detector

The House committee looking into the use of polygraphs, or lie detectors, has not yet completed its task, but indications are that its preliminary disclosures have forced a major change in the use of these machines by the federal government.

The Defense Department has directed the Army, Navy, Air Force, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and National Security Agency to take every precaution not to invade anybody's personal or Constitutional rights when making polygraph tests. Now they have to get their victims' written consent, and must advise them if answers are being taped, or if the victims are to be watched through a two-way mirror. Both civilians and members of the armed forces can now refuse a polygraph test without stigma being attached to the refusal, according to the new policy.

One of the first surprises uncovered by Representative John E. Moss (D, Calif.) and his investigative subcommittee was the widespread use of the polygraph by the federal government. About 20 US agencies gave more than 23,000 lie-detector tests last year; the Defense Department alone tested more than 15,000 persons. Federal agencies have bought more than 525 of the machines, at a cost of some $450,000, and keep a staff of 650 employees to operate them at an annual budget of $4.4 million.

In return for this massive effort at lie detection, the authorities have got miles of inked tape, filled with squiggles capable of widely-varied interpretations, depending on the skill of the polygraph-machine operator.

As explained in the hearings, the polygraph is a device which measures electronically three variable bodily functions: blood pressure, breathing and sweat gland activity. These usually are recorded at the same time, on a single, continuously moving tape, to provide a rough and ready measurement of a person's emotional state as it changes from moment to moment – "a primitive technique," is what Dr. John I. Lacey, of Antioch College, called it in his testimony as an expert witness before the Moss subcommittee.

Horrible examples of errors were given: one was what a mystery story writer might call the "Case of the Double Mabels." A prime murder suspect was given a polygraph test by the police, and asked, after suitable preliminary questioning, "Did you kill Mabel?" His answer was a cool, calm and collected "No." The polygraph registered hardly a tremor. Later, when the suspect had been convicted of killing Mabel, he explained why his lie went undetected. It seemed that in his nervous confusion he was thinking, at the time the deadly question was asked, about a *different* Mabel. Since this particular Mabel was very much alive, he naturally – and truthfully – denied killing her.

This is one way to beat a lie detector. Another way, the subcommittee learned, is to maintain a constant state of uneasiness, wriggling and squirming in your seat. Such variable muscular tension throws off the whole instrumentation process.

The vice president of a Southern bank was told emphatically that he "lied" when he denied he had ever stolen any money from his bank. The psychiatrist who told the story of the phony felony explained to the subcommittee that the bank officer was not under suspicion at the time he took the polygraph test, though he was after the test was completed. The officers of the bank all took the test as part of a routine precaution suggested by a bonding company concerned over bank thefts. "More bank tellers than the banks like to admit are in the habit of 'borrowing' money from their cash drawer overnight or for a few days," the subcommittee was told. When asked, "Do you know anyone who has been stealing money from the bank or its customers?" the vice president broke out in a cold sweat as he quavered a denial. In the polygraph operator's words: "blood pressure, pulse positive, strong. Breathing pattern positive. Sweat gland activity positive. Conclusion: specific reaction indicative of deception."

Some experts claim an 80-percent accuracy score for the polygraph, but for some law enforcers it is just a good way to get confessions. Strapped into a chair that bears an uncomfortable resemblance to the electric chair, a felony suspect is first told bluntly that this machine will infallibly detect any lies that he might tell, and then bombarded with question after question about his whereabouts at the time of the crime.

Summing up the doubts and fears that many responsible people have about the widespread use of polygraphs, Representative Moss says: "The pattern at the moment is one of rapid growth and expansion of the use of these imperfect instruments in the hands of inadequately-trained, imperfect individuals; [it] constitutes a major invasion of the privacy of individuals not even suspected of crime, where the price they must pay for seeking employment is probing on a broad basis in their subconscious mind . . . dossiers are built up and transferred from one employer to another and permanent prejudice can be created." ROBERT BURKHARDT